



Email is Evil! Behavioural Responses towards Permission-based Direct Email Marketing and Gender Differences

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**Email is Evil! Behavioural Responses towards Permission-based Direct Email
Marketing and Gender Differences**

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study assesses consumers’ beliefs in three Middle Eastern Arab countries regarding attitudinal and behavioural responses towards permission-based Direct Email Marketing (hereafter DEM) and the moderating role of gender in the hypothesized path model.

Design/methodology/approach – Structural equation modelling was used to test our hypothesized path model, utilizing data collected from 829 respondents.

Findings – Our findings show that attitude was found to fully mediate the relationship between beliefs and behavioural responses towards permission-based DEM. Gender moderates the relationship between beliefs and attitudes, and responses to permission-based DEM. Notably, female respondents were found to react more actively when exposed to permission-based DEM.

Research limitations/implications – Further qualitative research is needed to learn more about how and why individuals develop behavioural intentions in certain ways towards opt-in DEM. Also, neuropsychology approaches such eye-tracking are endorsed for future research to gain more insights and conquer biases associated with self-reporting procedures in countries where such technologies are deemed as legal and ethical to be used with human subjects.

Practical implications – Advertisers promoting products and services in the Middle Eastern Arab context should take further steps to enhance the quality of information [including cultural sensitiveness] and the perceived entertainment value that could be delivered to consumers through permission-based DEM, especially for female internet users. Additionally, this study highly recommends the double opt-in approach to permission-based DEM.

Originality/value – To the best of our knowledge, this is the first attempt to address the gender role as a moderator of the path depicting the effectiveness of permission-based DEM approach in the Middle East (Arab counties), from beliefs to behavioural responses via attitudes.

Keywords Direct email marketing, permission-based direct email marketing, gender, Middle East, Arab countries, structural equation modelling.

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Advertising has long been regarded and adopted by firms as an effective promotional tool that is used to communicate with consumers through a variety of media. Advertising in a digital world created a wealth of new opportunities for advertisers, as the possibility of instantaneous feedback and the ability to capture customers’ preferences to deliver highly personalized content became technologically feasible and desirable. Email, while not as glamorous as some other digital advertising channels available today, including social media and mobile apps, remains popular and relevant for marketers today due to being a fast, convenient, and inexpensive communication tool. In the age where most technological innovations are constantly replaced by smaller, faster, more powerful solutions, email remains surprisingly untouched by all of the advances of the technological revolution. Email is still growing in popularity across the world, as the number of email users worldwide is not only expected to surpass 4 billion by year 2020 but expected to continue its growth (Statista, 2018a).

Direct Email Marketing (or DEM) attributes its origins to a first marketing email blast sent 40 years ago. Conceptualizations of email as an advertising medium centre around the idea of sending advertising messages to internet users with email accounts (Rubel, 2010), either targeting specific account holders or via mass messaging (Gopal et al., 2001). As such, Chaffey and Smith (2017) regard DEM as the most successful form of communication technology.

Today’s marketers are becoming more aware than ever of the benefits of analysing customers’ residual data to work smarter, to make better-inform marketing decisions, and strategies. Times of worry for how consumers are accessing and responding to advertiser’s emails are now history. This is due to technological advancements that are now allowing for such interactions to be traced and recorded. Notwithstanding, significant differences in consumers attitudinal outcomes towards DEM across countries, geographic regions, and

industries can be very possible. In this regard, learning about how customers engage with DEM in different contexts could provide invaluable opportunities to the marketers to target different markets effectively through culturally tailored digital marketing communication strategies.

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016, p.523) defines permission-based DEM as the form of email direct marketing where “an individual agrees to receive email communications”. This research studies attitudinal and behavioural responses to permission-based DEM messages as exhibited by users/subscribers in three Arabic Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Oman. Furthermore, this investigation is an attempt to explore how gender could impact the relationships amongst the aforementioned variables regarding opt-in email marketing messages. While the Middle East region represents only about 3.9% of the world’s internet users, it has exhibited the second highest internet users growth rate in the world - 4,894% between 2000 and 2018, which is more than four times the overall world-wide internet users growth rate. What is also notably distinct among users in the region is the proliferation of webmail usage to access emails, rather than using mobile or desktop devices. While almost half of email users in the world (49.1%) access emails on their mobile devices (IBM 2018 Marketing Benchmark report, 2018), the Middle East region has a significantly smaller percentage, only 33.6% according to the IBM report (although India and Africa are included in the same region), of mobile email users, with 56% of users getting their email via webmail, which represents the second highest percentage in the world after Latin America and Caribbean (and twice as high as England, who is the world leader in mobile email usage). Email read rates in Middle East are among the highest in the world (only Canada and Australia /New Zealand have higher rates according to IBM 2018 report). Respectively, the region shows among the lowest “glanced and deleted” and “skimmed” email rates. It is not surprising that the Middle East, similar to other geographic regions in the world, has seen a significant shift in advertising towards utilization of digital platforms with advertisers' expecting internet advertising to

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become the fastest growing format through 2019 (Gulf Marketing Review, 2017). Furthermore, in 2016, checking email on a smart phone was found to form 47 to 66% of the weekly online activities in the Middle East (Google, nd).

Whilst information technology and its application to marketing communication has been widely studied, most extant studies in this field were conducted in Western settings with developed telecommunication infrastructures (Baliameune-Lutz, 2003). Little research has been conducted outside developed countries about internet users’ attitudes and behavioural responses to DEM (Mahmoud, 2015). The dearth of non-Western settings for studying DEM is surprising given the rapid expansion of computer and internet use in developing countries (Chinn and Fairlie, 2010). To address the apparent knowledge gap and to advance the existing body of knowledge in this domain, our study investigates the effectiveness of permission-based DEM in a Middle Eastern context, by studying the relationships between beliefs, attitudes and behavioural responses towards DEM. Our inquiry aims to determine how Middle Eastern Arab internet users evaluate those relationships and whether the internet user’s gender moderates the hypothesized path.

To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to offer an empirical evidence to address the gender role as a moderator of the path from beliefs to behavioural responses via attitudes depicting the effectiveness of permission-based DEM in the cultural context of Arab countries in the Middle East. Advertisers promoting products and services to a Middle Eastern consumer should take further steps to enhance the quality of information [including cultural sensitiveness] and the perceived entertainment value that could be delivered through DEM, especially for female internet users.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Much of the peer-review literature regarding DEM corresponds to the opt-out version of DEM. However, looking at the other types of good sources (e.g., trade magazines) to gain rationale for our hypotheses, contributors from both academic or industrial backgrounds have largely used opt-out behavioural outcomes in their discussions about permission-based DEM. Thus, this study, for the most part of this section, adopts a generic review of the literature about DEM and attempts to align this review to permission-based DEM. Further, this inquiry conceptualises the relationships amongst the variables based on the *planned behaviour theory* which is discussed later in the subsections.

Effects of expanding marketplace and DEM

Since the advent of the internet, organisations have been trading not only in the physical space but also in the virtual marketplace. Developments in internet technology have facilitated global transactions in various areas of business (Buchanan et al., 2016). Modern business entails that competitive advantage is multidimensional and is thought of and gained in a plurality of spheres. The virtual sphere has emerged to be a significant battle ground for organisations in Western societies (Pikas and Sorrentino 2014). However, the virtual influence for the internet is also growing in the developing world. In fact, Pilinkiene, et al. (2013) recognize that e-business solutions have a positive effect on various business processes, though in some cases this does not materialise into increased profits. However, overall the effect of e-business and e-advertising on companies is significant. Scholars such as Dadzie et al. (2005), Porter (2001) and Sanders (2007) found that supply chain activities conducted virtually, through personalisation of customer service, increased customer loyalty. More recently, Pikas and Sorrentino (2014) pointed to the fact that more and more consumers are spending their time on the internet, leading companies to take advertising campaigns to online platforms.

In recent years, competition in virtual platforms has manifested in the form of Email direct marketing (DEM), with advertisers reaching out beyond the use of their own websites to online advertising platforms such as Google, Facebook, and MSN among others. The spread of digital transactions and DEM, in particular, could pose challenges to maintaining an organization's cultural integrity even in well-established organizations (Buchanan et al., 2016). Thus, a gradual adaptation is suggested for organisations and cultures to survive.

Characteristics of DEM as a form of internet-based marketing

Internet-based advertising has become a significant aspect of modern business practices and organisations (Tavor, 2011). Its rise to prominence, and almost as the preferred mode of receiving product information by many communities, stems not only from the development of the internet but also from the evolving pressures of modern living characterised by intense competition to reach consumers before competitors do. With the number of online users reachable by e-advertising already exceeding half of the population of the planet and continuing to grow (Statista, 2018b), millions of households are now connected in both the developed and developing worlds, rendering advertising continuously accessible to a wider audience in a single day (Li, and Huang, 2016; Tavor, 2011; Becker-Olsen, 2003). This surpasses traditional means of advertising such as newspapers, billboards, and leaflet drops by a significant margin (Fuxman et al., 2014). Many authors (Tavor, 2011; Faber, Lee and Nan, 2004; Zourikalatehsamad, 2015) therefore see the speed with which digital marketing reaches its audiences as a key characteristic and advantage of such means of advertising. This is further supported by Zourikalatehsamad et al. (2015, p.3424) who found that “predictors such as cost saving factor, convenience factor and customized product or services, have positive impact on intention to continue to seek online advertising”. This signifies that in addition to reaching critical masses, DEM also attracts return viewers and referrals. Faber et al., (2004) found that internet-based advertising is more effective when it is targeted. Their research showed random

pop-ups as irritating and not constructive, prompting a debate about advertising overload and information crowding. However, despite the emerging challenges of internet advertising, positive characteristics such as speed, critical mass reach, variety, depth, and convenience outweigh the negatives (Faber et al., 2004; Becker-Olsen, 2003; Li and Huang, 2016).

Beliefs about DEM

Wyer and Albarracin (2005) define beliefs as predictions people hold about the possibility that their knowledge regarding a referent is true. Mahmoud (2013) posits that beliefs regarding online advertising can be defined as collective knowledge that consumers consider as factual for DEM. Consequently, such beliefs can provide a good source of product information (Jupak, 1999) or an incredible source of information (Grabner-Krauter and Kaluscha, 2003), or simply a source of irritation for the email recipient (Ducoffe, 1996).

Ethics in Advertising play a vital role in the success of businesses and/or professionals (Snyder, 2017). Some scholars refer to the “unholy trinity” in advertising, which represents the case where none of the three pillars of the advertising communication process, i.e., advertisers, agencies, and the media, are willing to assume a primary responsibility for raising the ethical norms (Mostafa, 2011). Furthermore, many scholars see privacy as an integral part of humankind that forms, alongside newly imposed governmental regulations in some contexts, a dynamic challenge over time for digital marketers (e.g., Zorotheos and Kafeza, 2009 Pomirleanu et al., 2013; Im and Ha, 2015; Hartemo, 2016). In this regard, and given the rapidly escalating advances in technology, *internet marketers* are required to communicate more effectively with their target audiences using *smarter* digital marketing techniques and solutions to minimise the perceived privacy invasion. Such drops in perceived privacy invasion levels will likely be accompanied by incremental customer loyalty to a brand (e.g., Limbu et al., 2011). For example, a recent new regulation on data protection and privacy, entitled ‘the

General Data Protection Regulation' (GDPR), has been put into effect in May 2018 for the European Union (EU) and the European Economic Area (EEA) to add to the already existing Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations (PECR). The GDPR has been translated to apply to all marketing activities that use personal data over electronic channels, e.g., electronic mails (The Direct Marketing Association, 2018). Gallup's Honesty and Ethics poll states that consumers depict advertising as one of the most unethical industries (Murphy, 1998) which calls for continuous investigations to elicit, through the consumers' perceptions, the traits of advertising that trigger the negative attitudes towards the ethicality of advertising especially those types that haven't received enough scholarly attention, e.g., DEM.

Consumers' beliefs about DEM have been addressed from multiple perspectives. For instance, using cosmetics brands as the focal product, Martin et al. (2003) found that consumers, if influenced positively by the DEM, were more likely to visit a physical store to purchase the product rather than visit the brand's online website to obtain further information. Pikas and Sorrentino (2014), on the other hand, propose that well formulated e-advertising strategies can attract relatively large numbers of customers that few traditional media can attain given the vast number of internet users. The authors particularly expand on the role of advertising through the social media such as Facebook, Youtube and Yahoo, which have become normal virtual meeting and shopping places for Generation Z consumers (those born in the digital age from mid-1990s). According to the authors, Generation Z consumers use social media specially to build social capital and draw benefits from such capital. A key benefit drawn from social capital is information, which includes information on products, services, and current trends. Such a benefit transcends customer requirements about warranty promises. For instance, Logan et al. (2012) found that informativeness and entertainment beliefs contribute positively to the likeability of advertising by making advertising looks more valuable thing to female social media users.

Attitudes towards DEM

There have been multiple conceptualizations of consumers' attitudes in the marketing literature, mostly focusing on how this construct is measured (Batra and Ahtola, 1991), and its application to the purchase and consumption of products (Howcroft et al., 2002). In definitional terms, Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 1) provided what may be the most conventional contemporary definition of attitude, specifically, an "attitude is a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor", whilst Bem (1970, p. 14) defines attitudes as "likes and dislikes". Based on Bem's (1970) definition of attitude, we can conceptualize consumers' attitudes toward DEM as the extent to which consumers like or dislike DEM. In a Middle Eastern context (Arab countries), Al-Madi et al. (2013) found that a number of factors determine consumers' attitudes to e-marketing. These factors include "usefulness, information on e-marketing, convenience, enjoyment, privacy and security and website quality" (p. 536). Al-Debei et al (2014) added the trust dimension as a significant parameter in advertising web quality. These studies fall short of considering the influence of the possible cultural determinant given the conservative nature of many Arab cultures which could have an impact on consumers' behavioural responses to e-advertising.

Behavioural responses toward DEM

Behavioural responses towards advertising are prompted actions that consumers take after exposure to an advertisement (Mahmoud, 2013). Such behaviours could be actioned through seeking further information after exposure to the advertisement (Nedungadi et al., 1993). In the case of DEM, our study adopts two main behavioural responses, which can be operationally defined as "reading the advertisement" and/or "reporting it as spam" (Morimoto and Chang, 2006). This study addresses the dearth of research to date of consumers' behavioural responses to DEM. Al-Debei et al. (2014) found that trust in the web source of the advert can motivate

the type of response adopted by the consumers. Usually trusted sources will be opened, and consideration given to the message of the advert. These behavioural responses, in a time of increased security risks and 'fake news' is generally normalised in most societies and is not a behavioural response which is specific to the Middle East or the Arab world. It is important to explore the possible existence of other types of behavioural responses outside the reading of the advertisement or its reporting as a spam by the internet user, that is, ignoring email adverts. In fact, Burkeman (2014, p. 1) argues that "as email volumes continue to spiral upwards, our inboxes are turning into streams akin to Facebook's newsfeed. Nobody really expects you to see every item in a stream".

Gender differences and DEM

Fundamental differences exist in the way men and women use the internet. In fact, Li and Kirkup (2007) found that the gender gap in people's attitude to computers and their use of new technology remains a reality which is deeply influenced by different cultural contexts. A significant report by software giant Intel (2012) showed that there was a wide gender gap in the use of the internet in Arab countries, where women have more limited access to it. Not surprisingly, research suggests that men are more likely than women to use online services such as email to purchase products online (Shavitt et al., 1998; Van et al., 2002). This is surprising given that women generally found email more useful than men when communicating (DeBrand and Johnson, 2008), however, that can be deemed to be the negative attitudes that Middle Eastern female consumers hold toward ethics issues in advertising (Mostafa, 2011). The lack of equal access to the internet by women in the developing world puts them at a great disadvantage in many areas of life, for example, education (online learning) opportunities for online work and health information (Antonio and Tuffley, 2014; OECD, 2008) are harder to access. The authors also argue that such gender gap in the access to the internet reinforces men's control over women's lives in many developing countries including those of the Middle

East. Stephen (2016) argues that digital marketing has the power to transform people's lives by influencing their perception of the world and their purchasing habits. This means that as well as being a promotional tool for products and services, e-advertising could act as a source of information, education and socialisation (see also GSMA, 2015; Chakravorti, 2017).

This study attempts to further our understanding of the role gender plays in permission-based DEM. It is particularly important in the context of the Middle East and developing countries where culturally a significant proportion of women are the main care-givers and stay at home (Epstein, 2007). Our study therefore considers the degree to which these women may miss out on vital sources of information and exposure to the modern market place and whether limited access to the internet and e-advertising is linked to what Epstein (2007) describes as the 'subordination of women'.

Pikas and Sorrentino (2014) found a 1 per cent difference between those men and women who identified that they spend less than one hour, 1-2 hours, and 7+ hours per day on the web; 6 per cent difference between the number of men and women within the 3-4-hour category and an 8 per cent difference within the 5-6-hour category. The authors argue that men and women spend equal amount of time on the internet. However, we see a sizeable difference particularly as the amount of time spent on the internet increases, the difference of 8 per cent becomes significant. Our perspective derives from the fact that the data was collected in the developed world. This means that the difference in time spent on the internet between men and women could be more significant in developing countries where cultural arrangements put more constraints on women's ability to act independently of the male partner. This is corroborated by evidence put forward by GSMA (2015) which found that in the developing world women are 14 per cent less likely to own a mobile phone and have access the internet. This supports the Chakravorti's (2017) thesis about systematic digital discrimination against

women. Yet this groups represents a sizeable customer base for organisations trading products online.

The conceptual model and hypotheses

Academic interest and early conceptualizations of attitudes towards advertising date back to the 1960s when Lavidge and Steiner (1961) posited that consumers process advertising as a sequence of events starting with cognition, then onto affect, and finally conation. Later, Bauer and Greyser (1968) studied attitudes towards advertising and found that consumers discriminated between two clusters, namely, social effects and economic effects. Bauer and Greyser's study is particularly important in studies of advertising since it revealed the correlation between exposure to advertisement and the fact of taking notice of it. Those adverts that are taken notice of are likely to shape the consumer's attitude towards them. However, the historical context of Bauer and Greyser's research creates some difficulties in the use of the model in today's advertising world. Bauer and Greyser's findings were based on exposure to advertising in limited number of traditional pre-internet media, e.g. newspaper, radio, T.V., thus limiting the exposure to advertising to those purchasing the print or household with a T.V. or radio set. In today's internet era, exposure to advertising transcends these traditional forms of media to include a diversity of digital media which are widespread, easy to access and mostly free. We may entail that exposure to advertising is significantly higher but then such 'harassing media' may also alter consumer attitude to advertising. Later studies confirmed the significant role that beliefs about advertising play in predicting consumers' attitudes toward internet-mediated advertising (op. cit. Kamal and Chu, 2012; Li-Ming, et al. 2013; Mahmoud, 2013, 2015; Saadeghvaziri et al., 2013; Zabadi et al., 2012).

Garland, Yang and Kang (2016) conducted a quantitative study among non-profit organization's members to find out the attitudes of members towards advertising through post

and email. Their study found that email advertising was an effective channel of marketing. Likewise, Mahmoud (2015) has investigated the attitude of consumers towards email advertising in the context of Syria. His quantitative study examined the relationship among consumers' attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural reactions toward email advertising. He found that beliefs of consumers toward email advertising positively influenced their attitudes toward it. Moreover, he also found that consumers' beliefs impact their email behaviours as well, revealing that emails which are designed in an attractive way and consist of reliable information get more positive response from consumers. Another quantitative study by Andersson et al. (2014) regarding attitudes of consumers towards email advertising also found the positive impact of attitudes on behaviours and found negative attitude of consumers for email advertising. Their study revealed that negative attitudes vary across age groups of consumers. More negative attitudes towards email advertising were found in age group of 40-49 and positive attitudes were found among younger groups. Authors believed that younger people showed more positive attitudes towards email advertising because they are more used to the digital world. Merkle (2008) found that consumers have positive attitudes towards usage of permission-based email marketing. Khan et al. (2016) empirically examined the influence of gender and nationality on the perceptions of consumers towards email marketing and found positive response towards email marketing.

Based on the aforementioned studies, we posit:

H1: Beliefs about permission-based direct email marketing (DEM) will significantly be related to consumers' attitudes towards it.

The relationship between attitudes and behavioural responses toward internet media advertising has received considerable scholarly attention. The findings indicate that positive attitudes are accompanied by favourable behavioural responses towards advertising

(Mahmoud, 2013, 2015; Saadeghvaziri et al., 2013; Wang and Sun, 2010). Wang and Sun (2010), particularly, found that belief was a major predictor of attitude to advertising, which in turn was a significant predictor of consumers' responses to advertisements. Wang and Sun's study was conducted in the Romanian context, which within Hofstede's (2011) culture model, is a collectivistic culture, thus displaying cultural proximity with Middle Eastern culture (also collectivistic). We therefore posit:

H2: Consumers' attitudes towards permission-based direct email marketing (DEM) will mediate the relationship between beliefs about DEM and behavioural responses towards such advertising.

Consumers' differences regarding gender have always been an interest to marketers (Cho and Jialin, 2008). Understanding the variance between males and females regarding their beliefs about and attitudes towards advertising, allows marketers to target consumers efficiently (Wolin and Korgaonkar, 2005). For example, Darley and Smith (1995) indicated that males differ from females in processing the promotional messages delivered by advertising. The study by Wolin and Korgaonkar (2005) is particularly informative in the sense that it further confirmed the differences in male and female attitudes towards advertising in the internet and new media era, which is significant for our research. From a cultural perspective, gender roles in the Western context in which Wolin and Korgaonkar (2005) study took place are relatively blurred; yet they found that Western women's attitudes towards internet advertising significantly differed from those of men. With gender roles being more separated and less overlapping in the Middle Eastern culture, where men and women have strict places and roles to play in the society, we therefore hypothesize that:

H3: The path from beliefs about DEM to behaviour towards DEM via consumers' attitude will be largely moderated by gender.

Methodology

Procedures

Out of 1,500 distributed questionnaires, we received 829 valid responses that were used in our statistical analyses, via an online survey shared with email users in 3 Middle Eastern countries comprising of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and UAE (see Appendix for descriptive statistics of the sample's responses to the attitudinal measures of this study). We hired surveyors to approach the respondents using convenience sampling. Data were collected between January 2016 and May 2018. The surveyors approached the participants in different cities of each country, on different days of the week and at different times of the day for email addresses collection and to obtain participation consents. Given the conservative nature of the context of this study, gender match between the surveyors and the participants was addressed when the initial part of the survey was conducted, thus, female surveyors approached female participants and the same applied to the male counterparts. Afterwards, the participants were contacted via email with a personal message that included our online survey and an assertion of the confidentiality of the respondent's identity. The adoption of non-probability sampling in this study may affect the external validity of our findings. However, many survey actions include biases (e.g., non-response); hereby, the understandings resulting from the current investigation are likely to be greater than the limitations of the sampling technique (Wolin et al., 2002). Finally, the survey contained, in addition to beliefs, attitude, and behavioural responses measures, a set of demographic questions that assessed the gender, educational level, and age of a respondent.

According to Leth-Steensen and Gallitto (2016), the general consensus amongst scholars regarding the most recommended approach to test mediation appears to be towards adopting bias-corrected bootstrapping (BC bootstrapping) for testing indirect effects. BC bootstrapping was introduced by Shrout and Bolger (2002) and it mainly comprises of taking

multiple repeated samples with replacement from the dataset being discussed. Thus, we utilised BC bootstrapping to test the indirect effects with a standard 95% confidence interval. Further, we chose 5,000 samples for bootstrapping as suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Finally, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) conceptualisation to determine whether the mediation would be full or partial. Indirect effects estimates were reported as unstandardized coefficients (Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Measures

Measures of the study were already validated in the context of one Middle Eastern Arab culture (Mahmoud, 2015). However, as Mahmoud's (2015) validation took place in an extreme context, i.e., wartime, we went through the validation of process again for the items - as they were factorised by their original developer - to avoid any shortcomings regarding their construct validity. Doing so, belief scale items were subject to face validity again (along with the items of both attitude and behaviour) by asking academics and experts in the area of digital marketing in the countries where the data were collected to evaluate the wording of the items before having the questionnaire pilot-tested among 56 participants to ensure an understanding and acceptance by our respondents in line with recommendations from Tharenou et al. (2007).

Table 1 shows the original constructs and their measuring items (with sources) used in this study. A confirmatory factor analysis was run to evaluate the belief structure (see Figure 1) and it had poor fit to our data ($\chi^2/df = 29.88 > 5$ (Bollen, 1989), GFI = .73 < .95 (Byrne, 2016), AGFI = .58 < .90 (Brown, 2015), TLI = .72 < .95 (Tucker and Lewis, 1973), CFI = .79 < .9 (Bentler, 1990), SRMR = .09 > .08 (Hu and Bentler, 1995), and RMSEA = .19 > .06 (Hu and Bentler, 1999) which recalled measurement model re-specification (Byrne, 2016). Thus, we ran an exploratory factor analysis with principal component analysis as an extraction method and Varimax with Kaiser Normalization as a rotation method. The EFA results led to

reducing the number of factors to two dimensions (see Table 2). Afterwards, and for more robustness, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to assess beliefs structure new dimensionality as shown in Figure 2. With $\chi^2/df = 2.52 < 5$ (Bollen, 1989), $GFI = .98 > .95$ (Byrne, 2016), $AGFI = .97 > .90$ (Brown, 2015), $TLI = .96 > .95$ (Tucker and Lewis, 1973), $CFI = .98 > .9$ (Bentler, 1990), $SRMR = .017 < .08$ (Hu and Bentler, 1995), and $RMSEA = .036 < .06$ (Hu and Bentler, 1999), our confirmatory factor analysis confirmed the belief structure concluded by Mahmoud (2015), i.e., comprising of irritation and informativeness. Additionally, we assessed the convergent validity using the average variance extracted (AVE). All AVE values were exceeded the minimum of 0.5 recommended by Fornell and Larker (1981), i.e., $AVE_{Irritation} = .63$, $AVE_{Information} = .55$, $AVE_{Attitude} = .87$, and $AVE_{Behaviour} = .79$. Finally, measures were assessed for reliability using Cronbach alpha co-efficient for beliefs and attitude and Spearman-Brown co-efficient for behaviour (Eisinga et al., 2013) to check for their internal consistency (see Table 3).

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Results

The respondents in most cases were males (65%), held a bachelor's degree or were doing postgraduate degree (57%) and with an age range of 18-35 years (80%). Using one-sample *t*-test, our results show that respondents hold negative beliefs and attitudes regarding permission-based DEM which they view as being irritating ($t = 8.8$, $P < .0001$) and not informative ($t = -23.71$, $P < .0001$). Further, the respondents consider DEM as untrustworthy, annoying, and lacking the entertainment value. Overall, the respondents dislike email adverts and hold unfavourable attitudes towards them ($t = -11.39$, $P < .0001$). Further, the respondents seldom read email advertisements ($t = -11.20$, $P < .001$), rather they report them as spam ($t = 2.90$, $P < .01$).

The path from beliefs to behaviour via attitude was assessed following a structural equation modelling approach. All major fit indexes like the comparative fit index (Bentler, 1990), root mean square error of approximation (Browne and Cudeck, 1993), and standardized root mean square residual (Hu and Bentler, 1995) were employed to judge the validity of our hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. In this regard, our statistics $GFI = .97 > .95$, $AGFI = .93 > .90$, $\chi^2/df = 3.73 < 5$, $CFI = .99 > .90$, $TLI = .97 > .90$, $SRMR = .021 < .08$, $RMSEA = .057 < .06$ show that the path model has high level of fit for the observed data and consequently is deemed to be significant. Further, the mediating role of attitude between beliefs and behavioural responses is assessed using bootstrapping. The mediation tests show that attitude significantly and fully transmits the effects of irritation ($B = -.729$, $P < .01$) and informativeness ($B = .635$, $P < .01$) to behavioural responses. Thus, we found support for H1 and H2. Moreover, as a preliminary step in assessing the path model invariance regarding gender, a separate analysis is also run for each of the two subgroups in gender (that is, males and females), with the results being equivalent to that of the full-sample analysis. The equivalency analysis tests the difference between an unconstrained model, which presumes that the groups are generating different

values of the parameters when the model is applied to the data, and a set of constrained models, which assume that the groups are yielding equivalent values of given sets of parameters when the model is applied to the data (Meyers et al., 2017). In our case, the unconstrained model yielded a statistically significant chi square difference, $\chi^2 (14, N = 829) = 167.873, P < .0001$. Thus, we conclude that the path model has at least one path moderated by gender and to know which path(s) are moderated, we conduct pairwise parameter comparisons using Z score that is calculated on the basis of Bonferroni corrected statistical significance level which equals .0167. Therefore, we assess the significance of the pairwise parameter differences against a Z score equals to 2.13. Thus, gender is found to moderate the path from attitude to behaviour ($Z = 3.27 > 2.13$), specifically (see Figure 2), females' behaviour to DEM is more affected by attitude ($\beta_{Females} = 0.951$) than males' ($\beta_{Males} = 0.817$). We conclude that H3 is partially supported.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

This study was conducted in Arab Middle Eastern context and focused on the permission-based form of DEM, which has been deemed by many scholars (e.g., Chang et al., 2013; Mahmoud, 2015; Khan et al., 2016) as an option to enhance the effectiveness of DEM, i.e., by lowering the chances where consumers take unfavourable actions towards email marketing communication (e.g., reporting emails as spam, deleting them without reading). Our findings show that attitude towards permission-based DEM fully mediates the relationship between the corresponding beliefs and behavioural responses. Furthermore, we found that our sample

respondents exhibited negative belief, attitude, and behavioural responses regarding permission-based DEM. Although this finding concurs with the very scarce previous research that investigated DEM in Middle Eastern Arab countries (e.g., Mahmoud, 2015) and contradicts with the expectations that opt-in DEM will survive the subscribers' harsh responses, yet, our finding extends the validity of unfavorability towards opt-out DEM to its permission-based version and sheds light on the necessity for developing and adopting new techniques for opt-in DEM, as obtaining permission from email users seems to be insufficient in its current form. In view of our sample responses, we explicate this mediating role through the role that attitude plays in transmitting the beliefs' effects to consumers' behaviours towards opt-in DEM. Specifically, our sample participants who reported negative behaviour towards opt-in DEM would do that as a result of disliking it because they perceived those DEM communications as irritating and lacking informativeness specially for females. On one hand, this concurs with the relevant literature where females are found to have higher levels of fear of spamming and perceived risk than males (e.g., Im and Ha, 2015). On the other hand, our result is novel as it extends the validity of corresponding literature to the permission-based DEM. Utilising DEM on a permission basis has been suggested to enhance the perceived communication empowerment by consumers and lead to higher levels of consumer engagement in the marketing communication process (Hartemo, 2016), however it seems that there is still need and room for improving the way permission-based DEM is managed, specially some contexts (e.g., the Arab markets in the Middle East).

Practical and social implications

The findings have significant implications for organizations that use permission-based DEM to communicate their value proposition. In this regard, this study suggests some recommendations to minimize the irritation caused by permission-based DEM among male and female audience.

Inherent in the findings of this study is the need for marketing organizations to design and develop email advertisements that demonstrate deft editing, the use of colourful visuals, and contain entertainment value relevant to the intended target audience whilst complying with cultural norms in the Arab countries of the Middle East. In that sense, as Stephen (2016) argues, the e-advertiser needs to have accumulated sufficient social and cultural capital in order to be able to sensitively engage the audience. In cultures where electronic advertisements are perceived as culturally-insensitive and lacking informativeness, they are likely to be blocked by the State. Such censorship and the male dominance in Middle Eastern societies not only limits the advertiser's access to a sizeable proportion of the market but also contributes to the further deprivation of women and valuable product information, e.g. information on health and educational products. Thus, the perception about advertising in the context of Middle Eastern countries is to some degree intertwined with culture. Our findings also support Antonio and Tuffley's (2014, p.673) view that when "women are able to engage with internet technology, a wide range of personal, family and community benefits become possible. The key to these benefits is online education, the access to which sets up a positive feedback loop".

We found that females' attitudes to permission-based DEM had stronger effects on their behavioural responses than males. This implies that practitioners should be more cautious when running email marketing campaigns that target female customers who exhibit more negative attitudes towards permission-based DEM compared to males. Even though gender differences have been widely addressed in the marketing literature, however, in terms of permission-based DEM, this is a very novel finding. In this regard, we recommend that marketers should approach female subscribers via female senders to boost the effectiveness of opt-in DEM. For example, according to Henkes (2012), a report by CleverTouch Marketing showed that, on average, emails sent from women achieved an 18% click through, as opposed to just 10% where the sender was a man. Looking for another recommended technique, personalizing DEM

content rather than sending ungendered content can enhance DEM effectiveness when marketers send offers or content targeting female subscribers.

Although some critiques classify DEM to belong to the bygone era of digital marketing, we believe that it is current and not obsolete. According to V12DATA (2018), there is a consensus amongst 85% of marketers that DEM performance is on the rise and of those surveyed 58% described DEM as increasing significantly. Even with the rise of social media networks as a prominent opportunity for digital marketing, Singal (2018) suggests that social media marketing can be more powerful with DEM. Hereby, it still carries the potential to impact business, therefore, marketers should be prepared for future trends and should use appropriate strategies to take their businesses to a new level and to get more subscribers using permission-based DEM. In order to enhance the effectiveness of permission-based DEM, the marketers are suggested to enhance the features of emails in various ways. For instance, changing the current emails' designs by switching from visually rich messages and newsletters to more plain contents in textual form (e.g., Maybach et al., 2018). Likewise, an effective customisation could be also useful in making emails more personalised based on the consumers' personal needs and targeting each receiver separately (Wachal, 2018; Harper, 2018). Additionally, marketers may create positive impressions and inspire audiences by focusing on storytelling type of textual contents. The storytelling could include the sharing of consumer experiences, or brand stories, or both, which allow the subscribers to know about product's brand in the most personal way by promoting transparency. Storytelling also demonstrates the benefits of products or services and the value given to consumers through personalized experiences. Thus, this strategy can attract more subscribers and can convert them into paying customers. The storytelling strategy may not only have the potential to enhance audience engagement, but also can lead towards consumer taking the desired action because storytelling humanizes marketers' businesses (e.g., Harper, 2018; Han, 2018; Munipally,

2018). Furthermore, the marketers can focus on mobile optimization by going easy on videos and images, using responsive templates of emails, dividing text into smaller paragraphs, and paying attention on call to action (CTA) buttons and making them large (Harper, 2018). The marketers need to assess the forthcoming trends through predictive analysis of existing and historical databases to determine the needs of the target audience.

The permission-based DEM should also incorporate chatbots that can identify the likings of new subscribers. Chatbots can be also used to remind subscribers about special promotion or detail about future event or special promotion that have been emailed to their inboxes. Likewise, emails should include the links to marketers' site's chatbots to assist the customers in solving issues related to services or products, because the chatbots can reply to them quickly, thus improving relationships with customers. Eventually, we highly recommend the adoption of *double opt-in* DEM which has been deemed as the only technique to pledge for genuine permissions by the subscribers (Jacobs, et al., 2018). Double opt-in DEM happens when an individual submits their email address to a firm's list and is then required to revert back with a confirmation of their email address.

Research implications and limitations

Due to the nature of the study which led to collecting data from conservative societies, gender match approach between surveyors and participants and non-probability sampling technique was opted. While we acknowledge that the non-probability sampling procedure may affect the external validity of the findings and may reduce the ability to generalise the results, the insights resulting from the current investigation are likely outweigh the limitations of the sampling technique knowing that the use of invariance analysis to detect gender differences towards attitudinal variables regarding email marketing is one of the first attempt in the region. Future research is encouraged to use qualitative methods like unstructured interviews and big data

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analytics to learn more about how and why subscribing users behave in certain ways towards
opt-in DEM. Furthermore, neuropsychology approaches such eye-tracking are recommended
to be adopted for future research to gain more insights and conquer biases associated with self-
reporting methods in countries where such technologies are deemed as legal and ethical.

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Appendix:**Descriptive Statistics**

Measuring items	N Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Error	Std. Deviation Statistic	Variance Statistic
I enjoy receiving email advertisements*	829	1	5	2.29	0.04	1.16	1.36
It is fun to receive email advertisements*	829	1	5	2.25	0.04	1.07	1.15
Irritating	829	1	5	3.20	0.05	1.36	1.86
Annoying	829	1	5	3.16	0.05	1.35	1.82
Confusing	829	1	5	2.76	0.04	1.28	1.64
Good source of information	829	1	5	2.54	0.04	1.14	1.29
Timely – delivers product-related information	829	1	5	2.31	0.04	1.12	1.25
Email advertising provides information I really need	829	1	5	2.34	0.04	1.20	1.44
Helps me make good purchase decisions	829	1	5	2.11	0.03	0.98	0.97
I trust email advertised products	829	1	5	2.23	0.03	0.99	0.98
Overall, I like email advertisements	829	1	5	2.52	0.04	1.16	1.35
Overall, email advertising is important	829	1	5	2.43	0.04	1.18	1.38
Overall, email advertising is good	829	1	5	2.75	0.04	1.20	1.44
Reading the advertisement	829	1	5	2.50	0.04	1.28	1.64
Reporting email ads as spam*	829	1	5	3.14	0.05	1.36	1.86

* Not reverse-scored in this table but were in the analysis

Figures

FIGURE 1: Basic belief structure

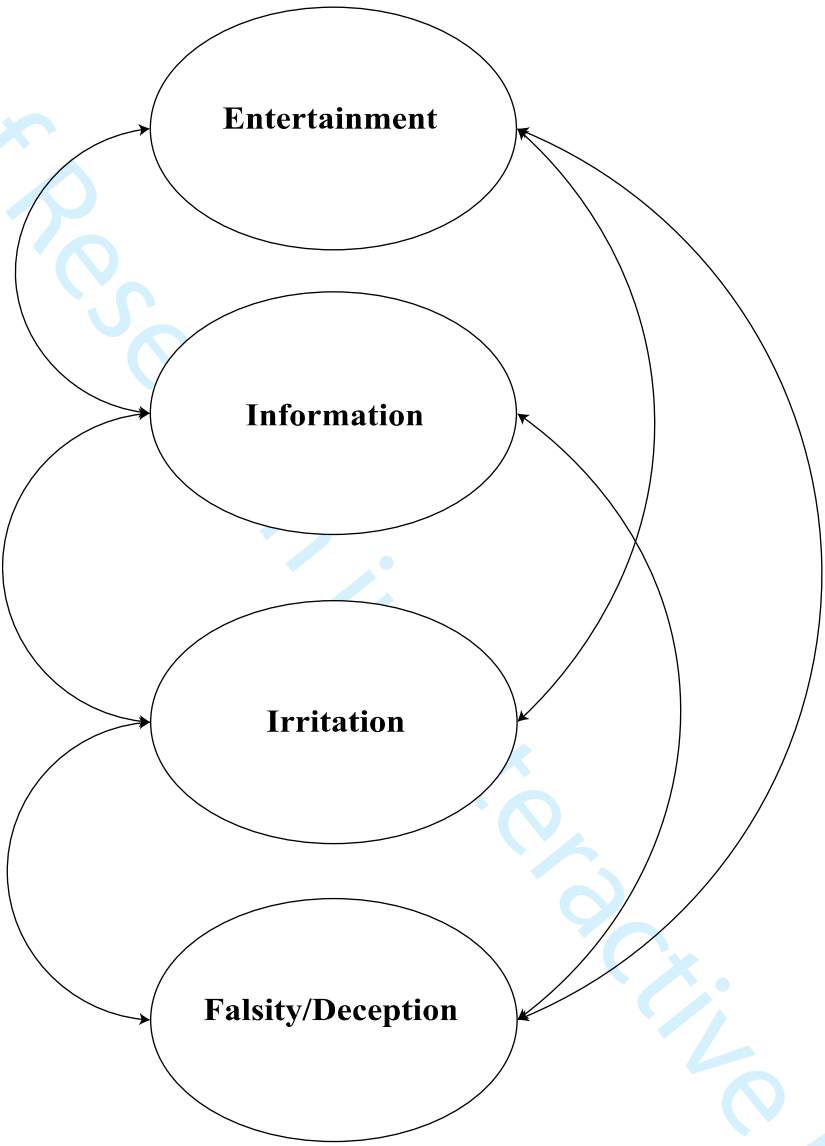


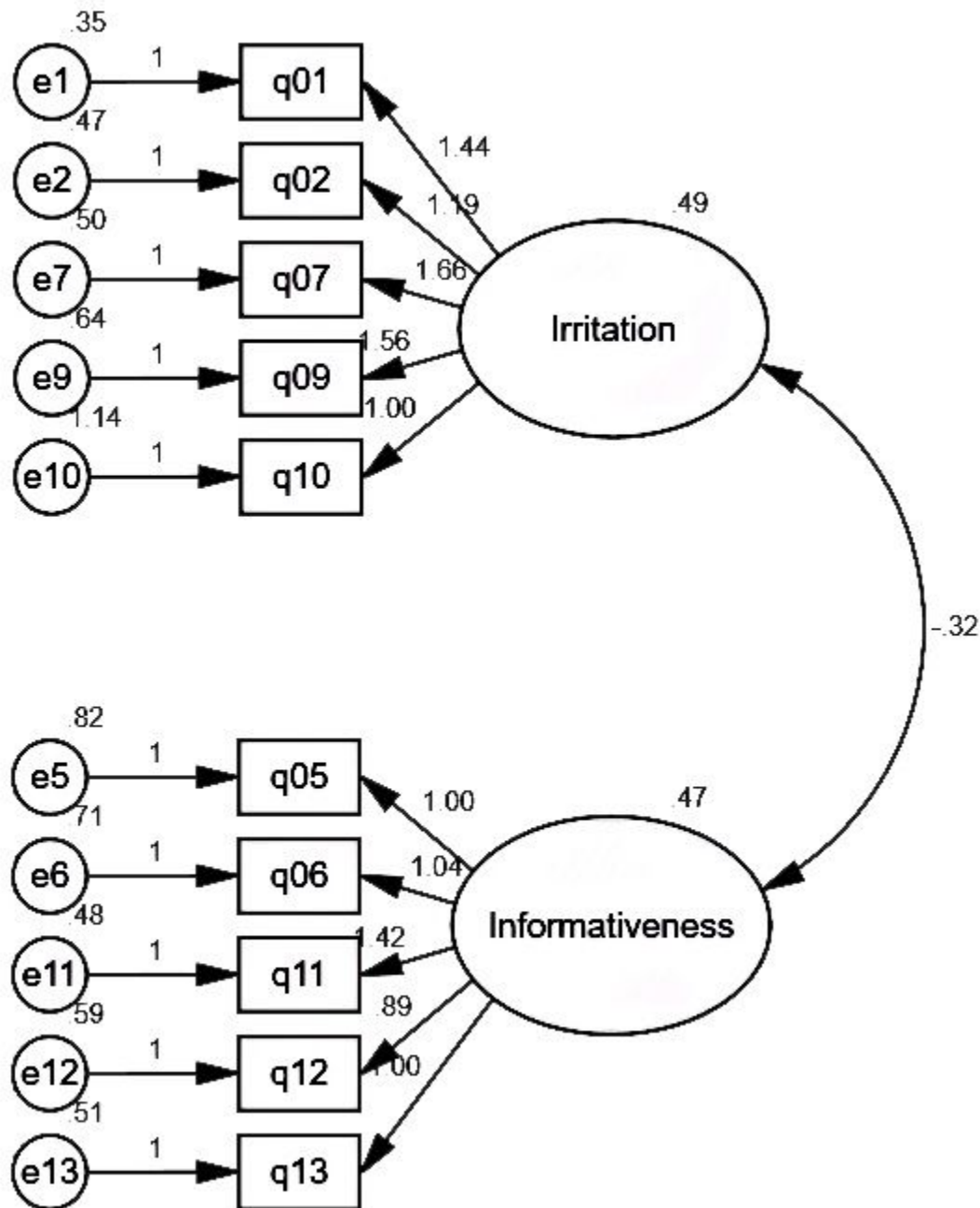
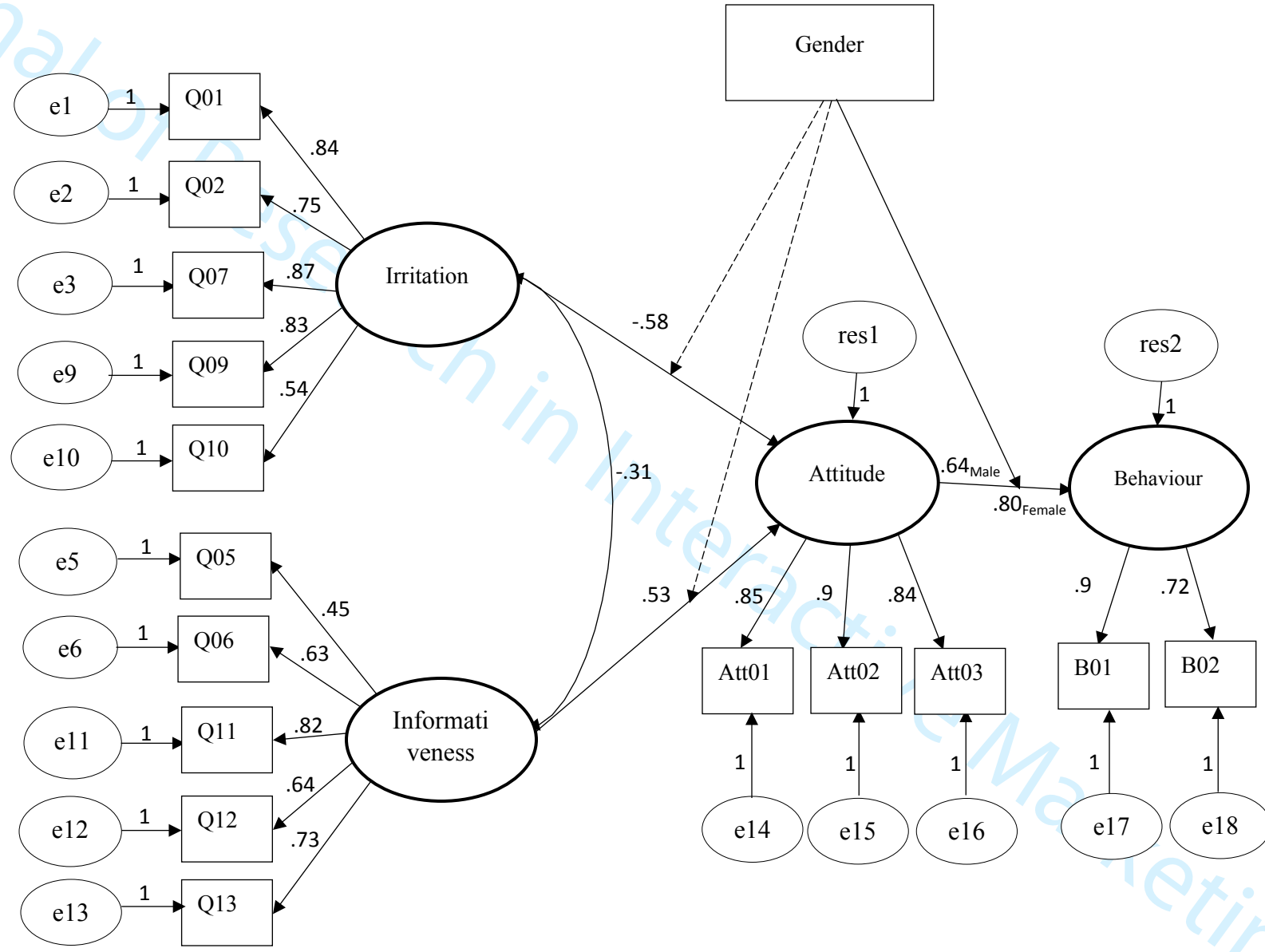
FIGURE 2: Beliefs regarding Email direct marketing basic measurement model

FIGURE 3: Path analysis



Tables

TABLE 1: Constructs measures

Construct	Item	Source
Irritation	I enjoy receiving email advertisements*	
	It is fun to receive email advertisements*	
	Irritating	
	Annoying	Wolin et al., (2002);
	Confusing	Ducoffe,
Informativeness	Good source of information	(1996) op cit.
	Timely – delivers product-related information	Mahmoud (2015)
	Email advertising provides information I really need	
	Helps me make good purchase decisions	
	I trust email advertised products	
Attitude	Overall, I like email advertisements	Wolin et al., (2002);
	Overall, email advertising is important	Wang &
		Sun, (2010) op cit.
	Overall, email advertising is good	Mahmoud (2015)
Behaviour	Reading the advertisement	Mahmoud (2015)
	Reporting email ads as spam*	

*Reverse-scored

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TABLE 2: Exploratory factor analysis of belief’s structure

Item	Irritation	Informativeness
I enjoy receiving email advertisements	-.833	
It is fun to receive email advertisements	-.725	
Irritating	.897	
Annoying	.874	
Confusing	.601	
Good source of information		.488
Timely – delivers product-related information		.733
Email advertising provides information I really need		.744
Helps me make good purchase decisions		.864
I trust email advertised products		.810
Eigenvalue	3.538	3.034
%Variance	35.379	30.339

TABLE 3: Descriptive statistics, reliability, and inter-correlations

Dimension	Alpha	Mean	SD	Irritation	Informativeness	Attitude
Irritation	0.88	3.31	1.03			
Informativeness	0.83	2.31	0.84	-.566**		
Attitude	0.89	2.56	1.10	-.805**	.740**	
Behaviour	0.74	1.68	1.18	-.737**	.517**	.686**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).